

***Practice Resurrection!***  
**Sunday October 20, 2019**

“Be like the fox,” Wendell Berry advised, in his poem *Manifesto: Mad Farmer Liberation Front*. Charles Foster took his words literally. Foster is a British scholar, lawyer, and veterinarian who has been fascinated by all creatures great and small since he was a child. In his book *Being a Beast: Adventures among the Species Divide* he writes about his efforts to overcome the distance between human beings and other creatures by putting himself in the places of a badger, an otter, a fox, a red deer, and a swift. He tries to get as close to living like them as he can, seeing and experiencing the world as they do. He eats worms and creates his own badger sett, sleeps on roadsides and under sheds by day and forages on all fours at night in the East End of London with urban foxes, straps himself into a harness and parachute to fly like a swift, and immersed himself in the river day and night, catching fish with his teeth like the otter. It’s a weird book, and I found myself thinking about his wife left home to care for their six children during his adventures, but it gave me an insight into what we’ve been trying to communicate during this series. At the end, Foster reports a conversation with someone who thought this project was absurd. So Foster explains, “I’ve lived, and I live, with the fox in an embodied, sensual world of wood and earth and bone and... cold. We met and we meet in a real place, and there I’ve started to use the words *I* and *thou*. The *I* has grown in the encounters, I can tell you. And if the *I* has grown, why not the *thou*? If we grow in the same soil, and in the light beaming from the other, isn’t that a sort of knowledge of the other?”

The *I-Thou* relationship comes from the writings of the Jewish theologian Martin Buber. Buber contrasts the *I-Thou* relationship with the *I-It* relationship. In the *I-It* relationship, the other is someone to be used – think about the encounters you have with a shop clerk or when you call to complain that your power still isn’t on – the relationship in the moment about getting them to do something. And any relationship in any moment can be *I-It* if we aren’t conscious – when I yell at my boys to clean their room or set the table or get off their phones, that’s *I-It*. But *I-Thou* is when we connect in the moment with the other. That can happen at the dinner table when we share stories of our days, in the conversation with the clerk when you see each other as human beings, not just as customer and server. To use a phrase we’ve heard a lot lately, in the *I-Thou* relationship, there is no *quid pro quo*. It’s not about use or personal gain.

Buber’s theology is one I draw on a lot – I’ve talked about it before in sermons – but I had never thought to apply it to animals or the earth until I read Foster’s

story. What would it mean to have an *I-Thou* relationship that went beyond humankind to other species, plant and animal?

This is our sixth and final week of exploring what it means to cherish the earth and ourselves. We've talked about the earth and we've talked about ourselves, but we haven't focused on "Cherish." And I think that word is key to a new relationship and new understanding. "To cherish" means "to protect and care for lovingly" or "to hold dear." When we cherish, we stand in the *I-Thou* relationship: we are not thinking about what we can get out of the other whether, that other is a person, an animal, or the earth. When we cherish, when we love, we want what is best for the other and we want to live in a deep and true relationship with them. And though we may use the pronoun "it" to refer to creatures, when we cherish, we don't see the other, whatever the other may be, as an "it." An "it" is an object, something to be used. When we cherish, we see the other as "you," a subject equally worthy of love, care, and respect as we are.

This idea of living in an *I-Thou* relation with the earth and all its inhabitants is at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Our Unitarian ancestors broke away from the traditional Christians of their time because of their belief in the inherent goodness of humankind. In this church that happened in 1825. Our Transcendentalist ancestors enlarged that goodness to encompass the natural world as well, finding the divine inherent in birds, beasts, flowers, trees, and stones. Though none of them of course used the 20<sup>th</sup> century concept of the *I-Thou* relationship, their theology leads to it – for if all is inherently good, then it is not to be used, but to be cherished, that what is best for the other may unfold along with what is best for you. Unlike other Christian traditions which have to push against their traditional understanding of physical matter as sinful and only spirit as good, our tradition celebrates the holiness of all of life. And we need to draw on this holiness NOW to help us work with others to save what still can be saved. We need to believe and live the belief that the earth is not here for our enjoyment but for the shared enjoyment and nurture of all life forms.

In one of the earlier services in this series, we looked at some of the ways we could practice living more mindfully of the earth and its resources. Would anyone like to say something about what that was like? Did anyone start composting? Carrying your own coffee cup to Starbucks? Drying clothes on a line? Eating fewer (or no) animal products? What was your experience like? How did your practice change your perspective? How many of you will continue with the practice you pledged now that the challenge is over?

And beyond these individual practices, how can we carry this cherishing of the earth and ourselves with us in a larger way into the larger world? I have an idea, which may not at first seem to have much to do with the environment, but bear with me.

Last weekend, I was away, visiting friends in Maine in what is a Columbus Day weekend tradition. Part of the tradition is Sunday morning breakfast at the Common Good Café in Southwest Harbor. The Common Good Café offers breakfast June through mid-October when visitors and summer residents crowd the towns around Acadia National Park. There is no charge for the popovers, oatmeal, coffee, and juice they serve – you pay what you can. But the donations they collect in the summer fund the winter programs for those who live in the area year round when, with the summer people gone, money gets tight and isolation sets in. They offer a weekly soup supper with music to all who want to come; again there is no fee. I have never been to the winter meals, but I imagine they feel like the Columbus Day weekend breakfast only more so. Because what the breakfasts feel like to me is church. And to a visitor from Israel last week, it felt like the Sabbath supper. It feels like a holy space. Not because there's preaching or prayers or hymns, but because of the sense of well-being, connection, and care which the food and the music and the gathered people entwine. The sharing of good food feeds our bodies; sitting at tables with the people you came with and people you don't yet know fosters connection; and singing along with the music of the Common Good Band, songs like *This Land Is Your Land*, *Country Roads*, and *Good Night, Irene* evokes memories and feelings of the past, making for a moment out of time. And I imagine it feels even more like that during the winter because the people there, even if they don't all know each other, have the connection of living in the same community, sharing the short dark days and cold snowy streets.

So here's my suggestion – how about we host a community soup supper with music for Scituate to come together around? We've talked for years about the need for a common table where people of all views could come together in our community. Let's do it. And here's how it would connect with our theme of *Cherishing the Earth and Ourselves*: The meal would be vegetarian, so eliminating animal products from a number of people's diets for one meal which helps the planet. We could share recipes, encouraging others to experiment with vegetarian cooking themselves. We compost at the church, so we would be showing how to do that and perhaps encouraging others to start too. And with our new dishwasher, we wouldn't have to throw away plates and cups!

And perhaps talking with people who are different from us would create that *I-Thou* relationship we need to work together on the big things we have to deal with. This wouldn't be a dinner just for our church or one we offer to people in need. It would be like inviting people into our home – some already known, others not yet. And in that shared meal, shared singing, shared conversation relationships would grow. Our congregation alone can't stop wetlands from being built on or wild areas plowed over, but perhaps connecting with others, sharing views and hopes and problems, we could cherish our town in new and healing ways. Who knows where this could lead for our church and for Scituate.

Think about my vision this week. Add your own vision to it. And after church next Sunday let's get together to talk about how we might make the vision real, how we might better cherish the earth and ourselves.

- Pamela M. Barz